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Weekend Wheels: How plug-in hybrids fit into today's auto electrification wave

Dec 3, 2022, 8:00am MST

Jeep Grand Cherokee 4xe

Base price range, including destination: \$61,660 to \$78,870

Mpge: 56; 23, regular gas

All-electric range: 26 miles

Seating: 5

Manufactured: Detroit

Volvo XC90 T8 AWD Recharge

Base price range, including destination: \$72,995 to \$80,495

Mpge 2023: 66; 26, premium gas

All-electric range 2023: 36 miles

Seating: 5-7



VOLVO

Volvo XC90 T8 AWD Recharge

Manufactured: Sweden, but may soon be shifting to Ridgeville, S.C.

Read the full review:

Flashback to 2010: Chevrolet debuts its Volt, the first mass-market plug-in hybrid. With an all-electric range of 35 miles, it had an edge on traditional hybrids like Toyota Prius, which ignited that segment in 1997.

For buyers not ready to go full bore electric, there are 30-some plug-ins, or PHEVs, on the market today — from the redesigned Prius Prime to Bentley's Flying Spur and Ferrari SF90 Stradale. While some, including Volt, have been discontinued, new models are in the wings.

I've tested several PHEVs, most recently Jeep Grand Cherokee and Volvo XC90 Recharge. Unlike the first wave of hybrids, PHEVs can be charged at home to give drivers enough juice for short hops while having a gas engine to avoid range anxiety on long hauls.

But not all PHEVs are created equal. Most zero in on fuel economy, Toyota RAV4 topping all-electric range at 42 miles. The popular crossover's PHEV iteration and my favorite also boosts acceleration hitting 60 in 5.5 seconds. Unfortunately, availability is limited and some dealers are jacking up prices.

The 2022 Prius Prime tops miles per gallon equivalency combining gas and electric power at 133 as well gas-only at 54 mpg. Stats for the 2023 Prime are not available but expect an increase in those numbers as well as performance. I like that PHEVs also increase total range, Prius being among a handful that top 600 miles.

Some PHEVs eschew range for performance, particularly the acceleration advantage of high-torque electric motors. Three motors plus a V8 combine to give Ferrari's SF90 986 horsepower and a 60-mile-per-hour sprint in the 2-second range.

Think half a million bucks, but all PHEVs command a premium over all-gas and regular hybrid counterparts. One of the least expensive models, Kia Niro starts at \$35,035 versus \$27,785 for the gas model. Tax credits still are available, but rules are changing, so you'll need to do some research.

Jeep Grand Cherokee plug-in

Jeep's most popular ride, Grand Cherokee, joined the rugged Wrangler on the PHEV circuit as a 2022 model. 2023s start at \$61,660 versus \$42,830 for the least expensive gas model. Availability does not appear to be an issue for Jeep.

"Demand for the Grand Cherokee and Wrangler PHEVs has been high," says David Gonzalez, general manager at Courtesy Jeep of Superstition Springs. "We are getting a steady allotment from the manufacturer each month and we expect our available stock to increase."

Grand Cherokee 4xe is configured with two rows and 4-wheel drive. At 26, all-electric miles could be better given the price differential. But, with an equivalent 56 miles per gallon using gas and electric power, you'll trump the gas-only version's 22 city/highway number. Likewise, horsepower jumps to a spunky 375. Towing capacity is a decent 6,000 pounds.

Like their gas siblings, Jeep PHEVs are at home on and off-road. In fact, off-road rigged Trailhawks only come as plug-in hybrids. The interior is nicely upscale and roomy for five, but only all-gas models have a three-row version.

Volvo luxury crossover plug-in

Volvo sells five PHEVs, two crossovers, two sedans and a wagon. I tested the XC90 Recharge crossover, similar to the XC60 but larger with a third row available. It's priced from \$72,995 versus \$58,295 for the XC60 Recharge and \$57,095 for the all-gas XC90. However, there is a wait time of four to six months on orders, says Jeremy Sarnataro, general manager, Courtesy Volvo Cars of Scottsdale. Interest is strong versus all-gas models, he adds.

Horsepower checks in a 455, all-electric range at 36 miles. That makes it faster than Grand Cherokee with zero-to-60 sprints of 5 seconds or less. Max towing capacity is 4,000 pounds.

Volvos are luxury cars and XC90 looks and drives the part. As a large midsize, the front two rows are very roomy, but if you get that third row, it's best left to the kids.

Both the Jeep and Volvo dealers say they do not hike prices beyond what's on the sticker.

I like that both the Jeep and Volvo charge ports are near the vehicle's front so I don't have to back into the garage. PHEVs vary on charge time, some like Grand Cherokee and XC90 making it a good idea to consider a Level 2 home charger.

Most pundits see PHEVs as transition vehicles as carmakers pledge all-electric futures. Volvo, for one, is taking orders for its all-electric EX90 due out in 2024. While plug-ins generally reduce emissions per mile, figuring in manufacturing versus all-gas vehicles makes overall environmental benefits difficult to assess.

What is clear is the benefit to drivers whose daily needs fit all-electric range. For example, fueleconomy.gov estimates annual gas/electric fuel costs at \$1,000 for RAV4 Prime versus \$1,400 for the standard hybrid and \$1,900 for the most efficient gas model.

Bottom line: PHEVs are a nice option, but be sure to consider your driving habits as well as tax credit status, charge times, range and other specifications before buying.

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